



Left In The Lurch? Analyzing The Status And Issues Of Single Mothers In New Russia.

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Abstract: The category of single mothers is fluid and ambiguous. Single mothers are not new to Russia, as most of the roughly twenty-seven million Russians who died in the Second World War were men, leaving many mothers single. However, in New Russia with the shedding of the socialist character of the state and the withdrawal of the social safety net, the situation of single mothers has taken a new turn. Capitalist influences in Russia have changed what it is to be a single mother in Russia. Disillusioned with the 'weak men' and the state, women often end up embracing new aspects of capitalism. Though, it is seen that single-mother households are among post-soviet Russia's poorest, as they cannot count on either child support, subsidies or a life-long job, they face considerably less social stigma than what Soviet-single mothers faced. This provides some women especially those living with their mothers with the joy of bringing up their children without the handicap of a jobless or alcoholic father. Today most single mothers prefer to stay with their mother, aunt or other female relatives helping them at least in domestic unpaid work. On the other hand, those without any family support or state support constitute the most vulnerable section of society. This paper thus tries to look into the situation of single mothers in New Russia with its capitalist economy altering the fate of single mothers.

Keywords: single mothers, withdrawal of state support, New Russia.

INTRODUCTION

The number of women who are forced to raise their children alone is rising on a global scale. Scholarly consensus, however, is lacking regarding the definition of single motherhood and the reasons behind its rapid globalisation. Lone mothers have always existed in Russia and the former Soviet Union. Their numbers grew dramatically as a consequence of men's casualties and disappearances during the civil war, Stalinist purges, and World War II, when the majority of the approximately 27 million Russians who perished in the war were men, rendering many mothers alone (Utrata, 2015, p. 6). Since the liberalisation of divorce laws in 1965, the number of divorces has been gradually increasing. Women's remarriage rates are particularly low, although they have recently increased, and the rate of non-marital childbearing has been escalating quickly (Lokshin et al., 2000, p. 3). The situation of single-mother households has changed since the fall of the Soviet Union. Economic challenges have grown more severe. Additionally, widowhood is high and is exacerbated by the rising mortality rate of adult males. As a result, the percentage of families with children led by widowed, divorced, or single mothers has increased. In New Russia, the adoption of market capitalism brings with it a host of new difficulties for single mothers. According to Utrata (2015), the majority of Russians view the high rate of single motherhood as either unremarkable or an indication of other deeply ingrained societal issues like the dearth of dependable men or the unsympathetic State (p. 2). They are left to count on themselves or their female relatives, primarily mothers, to manage and navigate solo breadwinning and caregiving functions to survive in this cutthroat world after being abandoned by the State and ignored by society. Thus, it is critical to investigate how single mothers, who constitute a significant portion of Russian society, are doing in the setting of market capitalism, taking into account the phenomenon of 'feminization of poverty', and how neoliberal ideology has impacted their lives.

THE TERM: 'SINGLE MOTHERS'

In Russia, the term “single mother” also seems to have two meanings: broadly speaking, it can refer to any mother raising her children without a partner or spouse for any reason (Kiblitckaya, 1999, p. 35). According to the authors of the book ‘The Domestic Juridical Encyclopedia for Women’,

the phrase ‘single mother’ has a meaning that is quite far from offensive. The phrase ‘single mother’ first appeared in a decree from the presidium of the Supreme Soviet in 1944. The concept was further defined in a later proposal, ‘On the allocation and payment of benefits to pregnant women, women with several children and single mothers’ of 13/08/70. In point number 8 of this proposal, single mothers are defined as women who are not married but have children, whose birth certificates do not indicate the name of their father, or are produced in the prescribed manner on the instructions of the mother. Women who have been married to the father of their child (separated or divorced) are therefore not included in the category of single mothers. (Kiblitckaya, 1999, p. 35)

A single mother, in legal terms, is a woman who bore a child out of wedlock, given that the father of the child has not been established and there is no joint statement by both parents or a paternity judgement by a time of the child's enrollment with a civil registry office. Women who have been widowed or divorced and have children are not considered single mothers. In addition, as long as she possesses a Form 25 Certificate, a woman bringing up a baby in a common-law marriage with a partner who is not listed as the child's father but nevertheless acts as a parent is eligible for handouts and incentives (Sobolevskaya, 2013). Because of this, some mothers receive state assistance as single mothers even though they are not truly single mothers.

In contemporary Russia, there is also a lack of cultural agreement regarding the definition of a single mother. *Odinokaya mat'*, which means “single” or “lone” mother, is a relatively neutral term that is commonly used to refer to all types of single mothers, including widowed, divorced, and unmarried mothers (Utrata, 2015, p. 36). Given how culturally diverse the experience of being a single mother is, the concept of single motherhood can be hazy at times. Cultural perceptions may also vary according to how much support single moms receive. For instance, a divorced mother's ex-husband likely provides financial support for the children, but this cannot be taken for granted as the majority of women receive little to no child support and Russian fathers tend to distance themselves from their children following a divorce. It is possible for an unmarried mother to live with a man, but it is unclear in these situations how much support she receives. As Utrata (2015) has noted, women contend that even in the event that a single mother remarries—and fewer Russian women than men do so after divorce—she continues to be “practically single” given that “most men don't contribute much, particularly if it's not their own child.” (p. 8)

CHANGED TIMES: NEW RUSSIA AND SINGLE MOTHERS

Soviet single mothers, particularly unmarried but, to a lesser extent, divorced mothers, received official support, but they faced much greater social stigma than single mothers today. While poverty was not officially acknowledged in the Soviet Union, single mothers were among the groups the state designated as in need of support (Kanji, 2004). In contrast, single mothers in the New Russia cannot rely on lifetime employment or child support. Though most of them work, very few feel safe in their roles as mothers at work. As mothers, however, the majority experience discrimination, at least if they aim for positions higher than the basic wage (Utrata, 2015, p. 20). The extensive free childcare, maternity and newborn health care, and numerous other subsidies—such as child allowances and separate allowances for households headed by women—that were previously provided by the social safety net are no longer in place. Families headed by a single mother are more likely to fall into poverty due to the absence of a second provider and the mother's low earning potential.

There was “equality in poverty” during the Soviet era. Because of the advent of neoliberal market capitalism and its concomitant ideologies of self-reliance, single mothers today have much less of a sense of solidarity with others going through similar struggles and problems (Utrata, 2015, p. 21). Single-mother households are among the poorest in Russia (“So Where Are All the Men?,” 2002). Studies have shown that households headed by single mothers are more likely to experience poverty. Lokshin, Harris, and Popkin (2000) demonstrate that families headed by single mothers who live alone have greater rates of poverty than families headed by single

mothers who live in larger extended households. The poorest families are those headed by single mothers who live alone with their kids. Similarly, single-mother families who live with their parents also have the lowest rates of poverty(Lokshin et al., 2000, p. 9). Poverty rates for single mothers who cohabit with their siblings or other adult family members are almost equal to those of single mothers who live alone. Low earning potential of single women with children; insufficient support from noncustodial fathers; and low levels of government assistance and benefits (transfers) for single-mother families are the three main factors that can affect the income levels and financial stability of single-mother households(Lokshin et al., 2000, p. 9).

The Soviet Union had focused on defending women's rights as both mothers and workers; there were few distinct rewards for single moms during this time. However, any time the state made a distinction between single and married moms, it attempted to lend extra assistance. Russian labour laws prohibited employers from firing single moms who had children under the age of fourteen. A single mother might file an appeal and have the ruling promptly overturned if she lost her employment. Furthermore, state-run enterprises kept quotas for the number of single moms on their housing waiting lists and rosters(Utrata, 2015, p. 29). As a result, some single mothers were able to find accommodation faster than married people. Trade union organisations frequently provided vouchers for single mothers to send their kids to pioneer camps and healthcare facilities, taking into account the financial situation of single-mother families. Mothers were given an allowance when they were unable to work due to their children's sickness (for children under the age of fourteen), in addition to covering for their children's daycare and education facilities, including their meals(Utrata, 2015, p. 29).

In present times, however, the laws put in place during the Soviet era, which made it unlawful to render single mothers with children under the age of 14 redundant, are flouted. Many factories' employers just choose to disregard this legislation, which leads to instances of illegal layoffs. The impact of the Soviet economy's shift is certain to further impoverish divorced or single women who are responsible for raising small children(Edmondson, 1992, p. 195). Stripped off of the state subsidies through the new market-driven circumstances, enterprise owners see no benefit in hiring or keeping women in the labour force, assuming that women with children are going to retain their legal right to work fewer hours (Sperling, 1999, p. 151). Women with children are the first in the queue when workers are fired, according to Alevtina Fedulova, the former president of the Union of Women of Russia, who delineated that employers or business owners are no longer reimbursed by the state for the benefits paid to employees who are mothers(Dakin, 1995, p. 256). In a situation where mothers with young children are perceived as ineffective workers, single mothers are especially susceptible.

A few of the allowances and subsidies launched in the late Soviet period are still in the books; however, due to high inflation, they are mostly obsolete. The only special treatment granted to single mothers is a meagre child allowance, which has been available to all families (single or double-parent) since 1998 only if their average per capita income is less than twice the minimum subsistence level (Utrata, 2015, p. 61). The "child allowance" or state benefits for mothers are generally viewed by women as offensive and demeaning, or at best, ridiculous, and undeserving of discussion. From 2001 to 2004, child allowances were funded by the federal budget; however, the regions were free to distribute child allowances more widely using their own funds. The scope, distribution, and transfers of child allowance have been placed under the purview of regional budgets following the enactment of Federal Law No. 122-FZ (2004)(Iarskaia-Smirnova & Romanov, 2012, p. 213).

Scholars concur that fathers are abdicating their responsibilities more frequently than ever before, and that mothers are receiving far less support than they did in the past. Most likely, the system for obtaining and enforcing child support payments is the primary cause of women's perceptions of being abandoned by the government and at the mercy of their ex-husbands(Utrata, 2015, p. 62). Child support regulations were stringent in Soviet Russia back then. It is only possible in the new Russia for someone to work as a guard for a hundred rubles and then, without letting his wife know, go to another job for six thousand rubles. In the Soviet era, this was not attainable since one needed a labour book and could only work at the location where it was recorded. As a result, things were easier for divorced women. Social protection for women existed on all fronts. They could condemn husbands who had not paid child support by locating them. Even though women have the legal right to child support from men who are registered as their children's legal fathers or from ex-husbands, these laws are rarely upheld. The 1996 Family Code states that all income, including that from private ventures, informal sector activities, and entrepreneurship, should be used to calculate child support instead of just official income, but this rarely happens. The amount of child support, in reality, is almost entirely based on fraudulently tiny official salaries; evidence of undocumented income is hard to establish(Utrata, 2015, p. 62). Women are compelled to engage in informal negotiations with their ex-spouses and make an effort to be appreciative of

what they receive. Single mothers are, therefore, increasingly turning to their mothers, their children's babushki, to make up for the absence of other forms of support because the State no more binds men to families as it once did by way of housing laws and the rigorous execution of child support(Utrata, 2015, p. 125).

‘WEAK MEN’: A COMMON PERCEPTION

Among other Russians and single mothers, there is a pervasive negative discourse about men. The post-Soviet era has given this discourse a new significance, even though it is not something entirely novel. In Russia, women are consistently let down by men, which can lead to single motherhood or, in the event that a mother does not receive enough support, the mother giving up her child. This should come as no surprise, since men's roles in their private sphere had been so thoroughly appropriated by the Soviet state that they were virtually eliminated. While the State's retreat may have helped elevate the expectations of women, it has not straightaway influenced men's behaviour (Ashwin, 2000, p. 50). The post-Soviet state has effectively abandoned its paternal role as the guardian of mother and child as it has reduced support for families, particularly for women and children. In a time when men are under more pressure than ever to be good providers, women are looking to men to be more engaged fathers(Utrata, 2015, p. 184).

Men had it easy in the Soviet era. They went to work, but they didn't have to work hard; after two hours, they went home and lounged on the sofa while smoking, drinking, and playing chess. Everything else was done by women. According to Stanley(1995), men are facing difficulties because no one is willing to pay them for doing nothing anymore. Many men have either found solace in a vodka bottle or have been unable to handle the expectations and temptations of a more capitalistic economy. Male drinking and domestic abuse, two issues that beset marriages in the late Soviet era, have only gotten worse in the post-socialist era(Utrata, 2015, p. 16). As a result, the landscape of single motherhood has been altered.

SELF-RELIANCE: A FACET OF NEO-LIBERALISM

Neo-liberal conceptions of self-reliance are prevalent among single moms in New Russia. This worldview encourages the notion that individuals should take advantage of market opportunities without relying on the government or anybody else (Utrata, 2015, p. 94). As an ideology and a style of contemporary power and governance, neo-liberalism promotes individual autonomy and self-discipline as well as decentralised accountability. There are times when single mothers say that men and the government ought to do more to support the upbringing of the next generation of kids. Still, they don't usually linger on this. Rather, as Utrata (2015) has shown, the majority of women speak primarily in terms of "taking what they can get," and they are fatalistic about their chances of receiving meaningful outside assistance(p. 95).

Russian single mothers take more than just pleasure in mocking the legendary “superwoman” who can combine paid work and household duties with ease(Utrata, 2015, p. 93). Rather, the majority of single moms believe that they are forced to confront this "mythical being" head-on and make an effort to emulate her. Accordingly, it is expected of single mothers to step up and make up for systemic flaws without complaining. By doing this, they show that they are culturally competent and have the ability to simultaneously step into a post-Soviet world with dignity and adjust to being a single mother. For single mothers, such cultural self-transformation work as emotional regulation, attempting to feel the right feelings, adopting new perspectives, and concentrating on feasible goals paves the way to success, or at least a successful self-presentation. In the world of market capitalism, which most perceive as a man's domain, single mothers strive to establish the socially required identities required to survive(Utrata, 2015, p. 94). With few choices, most women turn necessity into virtue and adopt a fatalism that affirms their own cultural competency in spite of being overlooked by the men and the State. Jennifer Utrata (2015) discusses the dominant cultural code known as ‘practical realism’. She contends that the primary cultural code of single motherhood, practical realism, is a gendered version of neoliberal ideology that both supports and limits the behaviour of single mothers. Expression of practical realism entails faking it to help you make it(Utrata, 2015, p. 101). This emerging requirement that women be able to take responsibility for themselves aligns with the self-reliance tenets of neoliberalism. In order to adhere to the gendered cultural code of practical realism, women have to embrace a negative discourse about men and the State, think positively and strive to become strong, improve their material circumstances, and maintain a variety of options. Under market capitalism, being weak can have disastrous effects on one's family, such as becoming penniless or homeless. Most women find it impossible to imagine Russian men sharing or even substantially contributing to household chores and child care on an equal basis. Wishing for it goes against the principles of practical realism since it appears unrealistic or unachievable(Utrata, 2015, p. 108). Though most moms try to

live up to practical realism by strengthening themselves and concentrating on their controllables, some mothers are painfully aware of their shortcomings.

CONCLUSION

In Russia, being a single mother is becoming more commonplace as an unfortunate aspect of the current state of affairs. In the article, “Society’s Perception of Single Mothers in Russia and the United Kingdom”, according to Dmitrii Sergeev, pronatalist policies have been entwined with the normalisation of single motherhood in Russia since the Soviet era. Even though it took a while for single mothers to gain cultural acceptance, they are now recognised as essential members of society. Their contribution to population replenishment, which is in line with the main goals of contemporary Russian demographic policy, is what motivates this acceptance (*Society’s Perception of Single Mothers in Russia and the United Kingdom*, n.d.). It is a fact that, unlike in Soviet Russia, single women in current times do not face stigma when it comes to raising their children. This includes those who have never married. In New Russia, a woman’s material possessions influence numerous areas of her life, notably including how other people perceive her as a single mother. This is quite similar to the other inherently unequal capitalist societies.

Women do not choose to become single mothers; circumstances force them into this role. Though most of them would much prefer to have a dependable partner to support them, along with some symbolic and material supports and safeguards from the state, which have diminished since the collapse of state socialism, they toil tirelessly to transform themselves into the kind of single mothers who can succeed in the New Russia (Utrata, 2015, p. 218). Single parenthood appears logical for some women, especially in environments in which matrifocal families prevail and women cannot actually rely on men or the State. This remains true despite the significant financial challenges associated with supporting families on a single income. While many do not view being a single mother as ideal, it is becoming a viable option for those who want to live a respectable life for their own sake and their kids.

In New Russia, even the success of the single mother is far from optimistic. Faced with some of the worst aspects of both patriarchy and neoliberal market fundamentalism, Russian single mothers are doing the best they can. In Russia, many of the institutions and laws that in other countries serve to mitigate the effects of capitalism remain absent or are still in their infancy. As Utrata (2015) has pointed out, some single mothers hope to reinvent themselves as pragmatic realists who can thrive in Russia, entrusting the fresh opportunities that market capitalism offers. Others feel restricted by the practical realism code. Thus, it can be said that today women face newer kinds of problems and are working hard to make it in New Russia.

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